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ABSTRACT

The Inventory of Socially Supportive Behaviors (ISSB) appears to be a satisfactory measure of social support with good reliability and some evidence of validity. To investigate the dimensionality of the ISSB through factor analytic procedures and to predict social support from social network variables, 179 college students (97 male, 82 female) completed the ISSB and the Social Network List, which reflects the structure of a subject's social network in terms in size, number of people one feels close to ("Confide"), percentage of relatives, and density (proportion of network relatives to number of overall relatives). An analysis of the results suggested that the ISSB is an unidimensional measure and the total score obtained on the instrument can be used as a global measure of social support. The four major components of social support (emotional support, tangible assistance, cognitive support, and guidance) were measured by the ISSB. Of the network structure varibles studied, only Confide was linearly related to ISSB scores, and then only for males. This finding may reflect societal values regarding sex role socialization for males and females. (BL)

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Social Support, Network Structure, and the Inventory of Socially Supportive Behaviors

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Social Support, Network Structure, and the Inventory of Socially Supportive Behaviors

Barrera, Sandler, and Ramsay (1981) have taken a big step toward more satisfactory measurement of social support with their development of the Inventory of Socially Supportive Behaviors (ISSB). The ISSB contains 40 specific behaviors that are considered examples of social support as defined by Caplan (1976). Respondents complete the ISSB by indicating the frequency with which they have been the recipient of each of these behaviors in the past month. Barrera et al. reported good reliability and some evidence of validity for the ISSB. As evidence of validity the authors report that scores on the ISSB correlated with the size of the subjects' social networks and that reported supportive behaviors from families were related to scores on the Cohesion Subscale of the Family Enviornment Scale (Moos, Insel, & Humphrey, 1974).

One aim of the current research is to explore the dimensionality of the ISSB through factor analytic procedures. Barrera et al.'s use of coefficient alpha to measure the reliability of the ISSB implies an assumption of unidimensionality, and the high values they report for this measure of internal consistency (.93 and .94) suggest this assumption is reasonable. Several researchers, however, have categorized social support into different types (e.g., Burda, Vaux, & Schill, Note 1; Hirsch, 1980; Mitchell, 1982; Wilcox, 1981). Types of support that appear frequently in the literature include emotional support (feelings of closeness, intimate interactions, esteem building, comfort, encouragement), the provision of material goods or

tangible assistance, cognitive guidance (advice, information, feedback), and socializing (having a companion for dining or attending movies, sharing interests). Principal components analysis will be used to see if these dimensions exist within the ISSB.

A second purpose of this research is to predict social support, as measured by the ISSB, from social network variables. Network analysis (Mitchell & Trickett, 1980) allows for a quantitative description of a social network. Research by Stokes (1983) suggests four variables that are important descriptors of social networks: size, number of people one feels close to, percentage of relatives, and density. Based on past research, the model in this paper maintains that ISSB scores will be related to network size and the number of close relations in the network. Percentage of relatives and density will be included to explore their relation to ISSB scores.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 97 male and 82 female undergraduate students in an introductory psychology course whose participation partially fulfilled a course requirement. Most of the students were freshman (58%) or sophomores (23%) who had never married (92%) and who lived at home with their families of origin (83%). Subjects met with the experimenter in groups of about 20 and completed the instruments described below as well as other scales that are not considered in this paper.

Instruments

Two instruments were used:

1) The Inventory of Socially Supportive Behaviors (ISSB; Barrera, Sandler, & Ramsay, 1981) asks respondents to report the frequency with which they receive 40 specific supportive actions on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 5 (about every day).

2) The Social Network List, a measure modeled after Hirsch (1980), provides the following variables which reflect the structure of a subject's social network:

a) Size -- number of people listed.

b) Confide -- number of people the subject feels close to; i.e., the number he or she could confide in or turn to for help in an emergency.

c) Per Cent Relatives -- per cent of network members who are relatives.

d) Density -- proportion of the total possible number of relations which actually exist among members of the respondent's network, excluding the respondent

Results

Dimensionality of the ISSB

A principal components analysis of the 40 items of the ISSB yielded 10 components with eigenvalues greater than one. The only large differences between eigenvalues for the components occurred between Components One (eigenvalue = 10.73) and Two (eigenvalue = 2.76). This result suggests that the ISSB can be considered unidimensional, a conclusion that is supported by the large values for coefficient alpha that were reported by Barrera et al.

(.93 and .94). Coefficient alpha for the current sample was also quite high (.925).

Nevertheless, because many writers have classified social support into several types, we decided to examine the nature of the principal components. Because several researchers have divided social support into four types, we retained four components and rotated them obliquely (promax). The four components are interpretable and might be described as follows:

1) Emotional support, or more precisely acceptance and intimate interaction;

2) Tangible assistance and material aid;

3) Cognitive information, feedback, and clarification;

4) Guidance with a parental or directive quality.

Predicting ISSB scores from network variables

A regression analysis was performed to predict the total score on the ISSB from the size of the network (Size) and the number of people in the network whom the respondent felt close to and could confide in or turn to for help in an emergency (Confide). The model using these two variables was predictive of ISSB scores, although not strongly so, $F\ (2,178) = 6.54$, $p < .002$; $R^2 = .069$. Of the two predictor variables, only Confide was significantly related to the dependent variable. Neither Density nor Per Cent Relatives was related to ISSB scores at a statistically significant level.

When the regression analyses were performed separately for males and females, interesting differences emerged. For females, Size and Confide showed no linear relation to ISSB scores, $F(2,79) = 0.54$; $R^2 = .014$. For males, however, the model using the variables Size and Confide was predictive of ISSB scores, $F(2,94) = 8.57$, $p < .001$; $R^2 = 0.154$. As in the analysis

using the entire sample, only Confide was related to the ISSB scores.

Discussion

The principal components analysis of the ISSB suggests that using the total score as a global measure of social support is appropriate. The first principal component was considerably larger than any others. Retaining and rotating four components, however, yields a solution that coincides well with the types of social support frequently cited in the literature.

Of the network structure variables used in this study, only Confide was linearly related to ISSB scores, and then only for males. The unexpected finding of gender differences in the ability to predict ISSB scores from network structure variables is intriguing. This finding may reflect societal values regarding sex roles socialization for males and females. The implications of these findings and their relation to sex-role socialization is discussed more fully in the complete research report, of which this paper is a summary.

Reference Notes

1. Burda, P. C., Vaux, A., & Schill, T. S. Social support resources: variations across sex and sex-role. Paper presented at the meeting of the Eco-Community Psychology Interest Group, Chicago, October 1981.

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